Recipe for Radical Engagement
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Main, June 1993 (National Association of Media Arts Centers)

From 1986 to1990 I directed Squeaky Wheel, a media arts center in Buffalo, NY. Squeaky Wheel was a newly formed community organization, and embodied much of the idealistic energy that characterized alternative art centers in the seventies. Our space was a small storefront from which we coordinated media production workshops and equipment access, exhibitions and advocacy for decentralized, small-format video. We also published a small newsletter, The Squealer, which was distributed both within and without Buffalo. We were very successful and grew rapidly, and after four years of growing pains began to look like a different organization – less radical and more institutionalized. At a 1986 conference sponsored by the Visual Studies Workshop titled "The Visual Artist's Organization: Past/Present/Future" the stress of institutional growth was addressed: "One of the penalties of growth is a demand for increased services, hence, increased funding for personnel, promotions, artist's fees, equipment, and facility maintenance." (1) In order to meet the demand for services Armin Heurich, the technical director at Squeaky Wheel, and I had to shift much of our energy away from programming and towards fundraising and institutional accountability. This was a very real shift, and I remember my frustration as my accounting responsibilities began to overwhelm the time I could expend on my community. Our storefront was first opened as a free space, and people were encouraged to stop by to show their work to whoever was around, to shoot stuff, to talk about art, culture and politics. Later we established 'drop-in hours' so that we could segregate some quiet time from our daily schedule for administrative duties. Much later, I found myself annoyed when a community member would drop by during 'office hours' for advice or support, and that's when I knew that I had to leave. It's true that Squeaky Wheel experiences perhaps unparalleled growth, (2) but this pattern of institutionalization seemed inevitable whether it was to happen within five years or fifteen. I'd like to analyze why and how institutionalization at Squeaky Wheel shoved aside our original vision of community. Some of the problems are inherent to growth, but some could be avoided with creative and alternative visions of organizational structure.

The 1980s were defined as a period when corporate models of leadership and accountability were being heralded as the savior of the arts. The big movement was toward having 'consultants' work with directors to develop new 'marketing' strategies. My experience of this trend can be summarized by the following anecdote: I was invited to attend a 'management seminar' by Media Alliance of New York City, an umbrella group for media art centers. I was reluctant to attend because as an art administrator I had learned how to use meager financial and material resources to run the most cost efficient operation possible, and I did not need a consultant from the commercial world to teach me survival instincts. But I was persuaded to go. The consultant gave statistical information about the museum and gallery-going audience, summarizing that the average 'client' was urban, college-educated and middle-class. The consultant's coup de grace was to surmise that, given these statistical facts, "advertising for your program should appear in The New York Times instead of the New York Post." I jerked up in shock at the elitist message behind this advice, and looked around me expecting to see the same stunned look in the faces of my colleagues. But I was disappointed to find they were busy writing this 'insight' into their notebooks. I realized that the art community has been completely brainwashed into believing that corporate models were going to save the arts – that not only were umbrella groups sold on the idea, but that artists who run spaces that have direct and intimate contact with the artistic community were

convinced as well. We were all aware of the pressures to institutionalize: funders demanded corporate leadership models; (3) dimishing arts funding required more support from the private sector; growth brought a greater demand for increased services; more services demanded larger staffs, greater salaries, bigger spaces, more rent, and then more accountability. Managerial seminars emerged in the Reagan era as the white knight to rescue the depressed and beleaguered arts field that was struggling from extinction. But the price of corporate models of accountability and commercial advertising strategies is that they institute the oppressive, elitist, racist model of the art community as 'market.' These models don't work for most community-based art organizations with budgets of less than $200,000 (three-fourths of the total in this country.(4)) In the example above, not only is limiting your promotional outreach to groups comprised of the museum-going status quo inherently elitist, it is also unrealistic-how many art organizations beyond the major museums can afford to advertise in The New York Times anyway? So these expensive, time consuming managerial seminars, and by extension the whole model of corporate accountability, offers no solutions to the majority of small, community-based art organizations.

Art organizations are typically funded by three sources: earned income (ticket sales, workshop fees, etc.) comprises 53% of revenue, unearned government grants comprise 22%, and private donations represent 21 % (5) The philosophy of the eighties was to bolster the 21% from private sources, especially because governmental arts funding was severely cut. Part of that philosophy was to develop boards with members from the professional community who were selected for their ability to fundraise. This reversed a long-standing tradition having artists serve as board members. Whether board members are artists or attorneys they face severe obstacles to fundraising for small non-profits. The most significant hurdle is that small organizations don't have the track record and/or reputation to attract significant private support. And even with a strong track-record, the fact that alternative art spaces typi-cally present or support marginalized artists and radical art ideas does not make them attractive to corporate sponsorship, no matter how corporate the internal structure of a non-profit is. And finally, small beleaguered art organizations can not, or will not hire professional staffs and should not be expected to have the experience to communicate the vision and goals of an organization to non-artists.

My argument is that small art spaces should not abandon the idea of the artist's board in favor of professional boards that fundraise for corporate donations. Instead, I think dedicated artist's boards should focus on enlarging the percentage of earned income in an organization. They could support the curatorial decisions of the staff by helping to coordinate volunteers, arrange publicity, provide technical support, lobby local government officials, publish newsletters, etc. It's a less ambitious, but more productive model for fundraising. The only caution is that boards must be vigilant to uphold the curato-rial freedom of the staff, or artistic committee. A board's job is still to fundraise, but by developing the earned, rather than unearned revenue.

Surprisingly, if you talk to art administrators they say that volunteers and interns make more work than save, because it creates a revolving door of inexperienced people needing to be trained. I have had that experience myself, but I have found that the more responsibility you give a volunteer, the more engaged and reliable they become. If you ask them to be ticket takers, they usually don't get very enthused. But if you ask them to produce your weekly public access cable program then stand back! The engine of a community organization is the community itself - if they understand the value of that organization to their lives, they will support it with material donations and labor. This needs to be organized and could be done by board members. In the early days of Squeaky Wheel I organized a lot

of shows of local work. As I became more and more burdened with the administrative tasks, and could no longer initiate these programs, I made a policy that if someone wanted a show, they would have to organize it themselves, We would provide our space, Xerox machine and paper stock, and in return would get beverage sales (the artists got the door). I feared the worse when the first two people to respond were on the margins of our community, had relatively weak work, and whom I doubted would draw an audience. To my delight and surprise the two individuals (who didn't know each other until they started to work together on this show) went all out and made a flyer, put it up, got a free popcorn donation from a local movie theater(!) and packed the house with an enthusiastic audience, many of whom had never before come to our space. Volunteerism can work, if given the space and resources to succeed. Until a German-style system of supporting the arts is instituted in the United States, we can assume that government funds will always be short, and must make preparations for more modest, community based initiatives to support our existence.

In 1986, a New York based artist and art administrator gave me this advice about The Squealer, Squeaky Wheel's monthly newsletter dedicated to promoting independent film and video: "Why don't you ask AfterImage and The Independent for permission to reprint their articles in The Squealeer?" with the implication that those established publications would raise the 'quality' of our publication. I coordinated the writing and publishing of The Squealer at that time, and I could not agree more that The Squealer was flawed. But it was always on time- it did not aspire to be a critical journal as much as to be the voice of our community, no matter how raw and unedited that voice may be. It acted as a newsletter - keeping the community informed about issues and events in a quick and efficient manner. The Squealer provided a forum for local media-rnakers to express their desires, visions, and fantasies of the newly politicized, engaged media community in Buffalo, and its relation to other communities outside the dominant cultural centers. Reprinting articles from AfterImage completely misses the point of the political intention behind our endeavor. Interestingly enough, The Squealer eventually became a battleground for contesting ideological needs-the community needed a newsletter to facilitate communication, but the New York State Council on the Arts saw it as the gage by which to evaluate our performance as an institution. In our second cycle of funding, we were almost zeroed by NYSCA because The Squealer was not I maturing' to the satisfaction of the panel. This surprised me because The Squealer was a relatively minor part of the services we offered to the Buffalo media community and very little money went into its production. It was layed out with the help of a generous graphic artist for $30 and was xeroxed illicitly on copy machines from the university. It was raw, certainly, but it did its job. It was important to us. And despite the reservations about the content of The Squealer, I was told by one program analyst at NYSCA that "when AfterImage arrives they file it away, but when The Squealer comes everyone in the office huddles around to read it.' Today The Squealer has 'matured,' but it has lost the original energy that fueled it. In response to increased pressures to 'professionalize' the publication (again, our funding became dependent on this), The Squealer grew to magazine' size from its original newsletter format. 'Professionalization' required more design and layout time, more staff involvement, higher production costs, increased postal rates. In response to the spiraling costs, production diminished from twelve issues a year to four. The original intention of the newsletter-to provide a spontaneous, energetic and accessible forum for local artists, had changed. Articles are now screened, exhibitions are rarely previewed, but rather reviewed months after the event, workshop information comes out too late, etc. Yes, it is a notable publication that continues to advocate for decentralized media-making, but does it still excite and inspire its readers? And is it worth valorizing professionalism over the modest goals of community networking and information dissemination?

Compare The Squealer or any other media journal to fanzines. Have fanzines reached more people than video art journals? and have 'zines made more of a sociological impact? I would argue that they have. Despite being cheap to produce, raw and sporadic, fanzines have thousands of readers. They have proliferated and have made a large impact on the numerous sub-cultures of our society. I would even argue that more people are involved in the production of fanzines then in the relatively small world of video art, and certainly more people read these 'zines than those who watch video art.

In 1989 1 suggested to a Rockefeller Foundation panel organized to expand audiences for independent film and video (6) that they look to the underground distribution of fanzines as a model for video art distribution. Everyone agreed it was a good idea for "the future" but no one felt prepared to adopt such a radical idea for right now. To my amazement and frustration they insisted on discussing how to put video art into video rental stores- despite reams of research presented at the panel that concluded that this simply would not work on a large scale. The outcome of this panel was to recommend the establishment of National Video Resources, which was endowed with five million dollars over a five year period to develop new distribution strategies for independents. In a time of desperately needed funds, five million dollars could pack a lot of influence. But besides the publication of tony brochures which give 'tips' on distribution, and a small re-grant program, what have they done to significantly contribute to the field? I say very little, and it's a disaster that radical ideas for exhibition and distribution are not being more vigorously promoted. The field has stagnated, many vital art centers have closed down, exhibition opportunities are disappearing, and funding has dried up. We are in bad shape, and need to center ourselves, abandon failed corporate models of fundraising and administration, and get back in touch with our original radical impulse.

1. Visual Artists' Organizations: Fiscal Year 1982-83, prepared in 1985 by Associates for Arts research and Technical Services, Inc. for the NEA Visual Arts Program and NAAO.
2. To my knowledge, Squeaky Wheel was the first organization to receive funding from the New York State Council on the Arts after just one year of operation. This was due to complex regional politics that compelled NYSCA to override their policy of not funding any organization unless it had a three year track record. In 1986 Squeaky Wheel jumped from a budget of $300 in membership fees to $30,000.
3. They also demand hierarchical relations amongst the staff. When Squeaky Wheel first met with NYSCA, I mentioned that the technical director, whom I had hired, would have the same salary as myself. Both of us were involved in developing parallel programs for our constituency. NYSCA argued that the director should be paid more than the technical director to insure the proper chain of command. However during my tenure, the salaries remained balanced.
4. Visual Artist's Organizations: Fiscal Year 1982-83
5. Ibid.
6. The Rockefeller Foundation Videocassette Distribution Task Force, 1989